



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

May 7, 2009

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NDI DELEGATION ASSESSES PRE-ELECTION POLITICAL CLIMATE IN LEBANON

In one month, the Lebanese people will go to the polls to elect a new parliament. They will do so under a new electoral law and administration agreed upon by all political contestants. This represents a significant step toward greater transparency and confidence in the process and the development of Lebanon and its institutions as a sovereign state.

Too often Lebanon has been defined by events and actors outside the country's borders. The National Democratic Institute is part of a growing network of friends of Lebanon who agree that Lebanon's people alone should determine the country's future.

Lebanon's history and sectarian divisions have given rise to a unique electoral system based on an allocation of seats along confessional lines. It includes elements of competition, and, when conducted peacefully, can lead to outcomes accepted as representative by voters and political competitors.

Over the past several years there has been a growing movement for political reform led by civil society groups. This effort led to the establishment of the Butros Commission, which recommended major changes in the electoral system, including proportional representation, that could, over time, lead to strengthened institutions of representative government.

Some reforms were adopted by parliament and a number of improvements were approved for this election cycle, which, it is hoped, will pave the way for broader changes after the upcoming polls. This is a process we encourage.

Recent and positive electoral reforms that represent improvements over past elections include the following:

- **Formation of an election supervisory committee.** The Supervisory Committee on the Electoral Campaign (SCEC) falls short of an independent electoral commission but sets an important precedent as an intermediary body that could serve as a precursor to such a commission as was the case in Mexico in the 1990s. It is responsible for ensuring the

implementation of Chapters 5 and 6 of the electoral law, which stipulate campaign finance and media regulations.

- **Impartial administration.** The Minister of the Interior, who is ultimately charged with the administration of the elections, was in our discussions widely viewed as impartial, professional and committed to administering a transparent and credible process.
- **Campaign finance and media regulations.** Newly-enacted campaign finance regulations, although diluted by significant loopholes, set a key precedent by mandating expenditure limits. Meanwhile, media regulations seek to ensure the candidates' fair and equal access to all media outlets. While questions remain regarding enforcement of the new rules, most parties and candidates have welcomed the changes.
- **Accreditation of domestic and international observers.** The June 7 elections will be the first in Lebanon's history in which the Council of Ministers issued a decree allowing the Minister of Interior to accredit international observers. The electoral law also allows domestic election observation. This initiative brings an added degree of transparency to the process and helps to build confidence in the elections by Lebanese citizens.

At the same time, assessing the Lebanese electoral system in relation to international norms and standards presents a challenge for international observation. The Lebanese army is charged with maintaining order around the elections, but one of the political contestants maintains a major armed force not under the control of the state. Other parties also possess arms of various sizes and capabilities.

Given the allocation of parliamentary seats by district and along confessional lines, and a "winner take all" majoritarian system, the results are all but predetermined in an overwhelming majority of the races.

The lack of pre-printed ballots can compromise secrecy of the vote and strengthens the power of political elites creating the opportunity for deal-making and undue influence of voters. Moreover, the drawing of district lines has led to large discrepancies in the number of voters per district and therefore to unequal weight given to each vote.

Voters register and vote in their ancestral villages rather than their place of residence, requiring them to travel long distances and, in some cases to areas now dominated by another confessional group. Moreover, women are required to vote in the ancestral home of their husbands.

All of the above-mentioned issues have been part of the Lebanese electoral reform debate. While further reforms can be considered following the upcoming polls, there are a number of steps that could be taken between now and June 7 to further enhance the credibility of the elections:

- **The ability to challenge and adjudicate election results.** According to Lebanese law, the Constitutional Council (comprised of 10 members—five elected by parliament and five appointed by the Council of Ministers) is charged with accrediting the entire process through resolving voting disputes after the polls. However, the Council has yet to be

formed, with many observers concerned that it will not be established by election day. The delegation hopes that a means will be found between now and June 7 to break the existing political deadlock and that the Council will be established and fulfill its mandate.

- **Logistical and security issues.** Holding elections in a single day rather than on consecutive weekends is one of the newly-enacted reforms; however it entails major logistical challenges. The election authorities recognize that given the large-scale movement of voters around the elections and closely contested races in certain districts, plans must be put in place to ensure adequate voter mobility and security. Mobilizing an estimated 30,000 security forces (both the army and police) will require significant management and coordination efforts by the Defense and Interior ministries. The delegation also hopes that the Interior Ministry will take all appropriate measures under its authority against those who may violate electoral law during this critical pre-election period. Voter security and a peaceful election environment can be further enhanced with the adoption by the political parties of a code of conduct – an initiative now being advanced by the Minister of the Interior.
- **Voter education.** NDI's long-term observers report a need for greater information for candidates, parties and the public on the specifics of the new election law and note that there is confusion about the role of district and local officials in the election process. The delegation hopes that between now and election day, the election authorities could expand the education campaign they launched earlier to better inform election workers and voters about new regulations.

Background

NDI's delegation visited Lebanon from May 5-8 to assess preparations for the June 7, 2009, parliamentary elections. The purpose of the delegation was to demonstrate the interest of the international community in the development of the democratic political process and governance in Lebanon, and to present an accurate and impartial assessment of the political environment leading up to the June 7 polls.

The delegation was composed of Madeleine K. Albright, chairman of NDI and former U.S. Secretary of State; Joseph Clark, former Prime Minister of Canada; Toni G. Verstandig, director of Middle East programs at the Aspen Institute; Kenneth Wollack, president of NDI; and Leslie Campbell, NDI's regional director for the Middle East and North Africa. The delegation met with candidates, party leaders, government officials, representatives of the major political alliances and various other leaders from the women's, civil society, and international communities.

International election observation has become widely accepted by countries all around the globe and it now plays an important role in informing citizens and the international community about the nature of each country's electoral process. International election observation, when done in accordance with accepted principles for impartial assessments, has the potential to enhance the integrity of election processes by encouraging best electoral practices and deterring misconduct, as well as by identifying problems and irregularities, which can lead to effective redress. It thus

contributes to building the appropriate degree of public confidence in elections and resulting governments.

International observation does not favor any electoral contestant and election observers are welcomed by long-established democracies, as well as by countries that are in the early stages of democratic development. NDI has organized over 150 delegations to observe pre-election, election-day and post-election processes around the globe, including in Algeria, Morocco, Palestinian Territories, Yemen, as well as Lebanon. The Institute conducts its election observation in accordance with the [Declaration of Principles for International Election Observation](#), which is endorsed by 32 intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations, including the United Nations Secretariat.

Pre-election assessment visits are an important component of NDI's election observation mission. Ten weeks in advance of the Lebanese election, NDI sent a team of experienced long-term observers from Paraguay, Portugal, Kazakhstan, Slovakia, Yemen, the United Kingdom and the United States. They are observing the pre-election period in five regions in the country. NDI will deploy an additional international group of 50 observers for the June 7 elections and the post-election period.

NDI had been officially accredited to conduct an international election observation mission by the Ministry of the Interior and is grateful to the Ministry for welcoming this and other international observation groups. The delegation does not seek to interfere in Lebanon's election process, nor does it intend to, or could it, render a final assessment of the election process. NDI recognizes that it will be the people of Lebanon who will determine the credibility of elections. The delegation offers this pre-election statement in the spirit of supporting and strengthening democratic institutions in Lebanon.

NDI has sponsored democratic development programs in Lebanon since 1995 and has maintained an office in the country since 2001. The Institute's international election observation mission in Lebanon is funded by a grant from the U.S. Agency for International Development.

The National Democratic Institute is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization working to support and strengthen democratic institutions worldwide by promoting citizen participation, openness and accountability in government. More information is available at www.ndi.org.

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